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ABSTRACT

This paper urges states to continue to press for excellence in education by making teachers partners in school improvement. It explains what research indicates are the next steps that policymakers can take to affect student achievement. It notes that policymakers must acknowledge the school as the locus of change and teachers as the bridge between state actions and classroom changes. Teachers, who know firsthand what is needed to improve schools, could lead to a renaissance in teaching and to real gains in student achievement. (JD)

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MAKING TEACHERS PARTNERS IN REFORM

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TEACHING IN AMERICA: THE POSSIBLE RENAISSANCE

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

ECS WORKING PAPER

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MAKING TEACHERS PARTNERS IN REFORM

No. TR-86-1

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The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965. The primary purpose of the commission is to assist governors, state legislators, state education officials and others to develop policies to improve the quality of education at all levels. Forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are members. The ECS central offices are at 1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300, Denver, Colorado 80295. The Washington office is in the Hall of the States, 444 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 248, Washington, D.C. 20001.

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REFORM MUST CONTINUE

Have the many recent new state education reforms really brought about improvements in America's classrooms? That is, are there real differences now in how teachers teach and students learn? It is probably still too soon to expect real differences. But we can say with certainty that the first steps have been exciting. In virtually every state, governors, legislators, educators and taxpayers have demonstrated their interest in improving the quality of schools by instituting varied reforms and by backing them with tax dollars. Clearly, a strong national consensus exists for providing a better education for the nation's children.

A new survey by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), New Directions for State Teacher Policies 1985, documents the activities aimed primarily at strengthening the teaching profession. States have of late favored initiatives that seek to make teaching a more desirable career, so they can steer talented people into teaching and head off the teacher shortages experts predict.

But, important as these types of initiatives are, they cannot in themselves guarantee that education will improve. If education reform is to produce the genuine improvement in teaching and learning that is its ultimate aim, states need to move forward from policies designed to make more and better teachers available to policies that shape how schools operate. Needed next are policies that enable teachers to do their jobs more effectively and with greater personal satisfaction. Needed, too, are policies that promote the conditions for teaching/learning that research has shown to be important.

State policy makers also need to consider how best to tackle these new sorts of reforms. What we have learned points to the importance of making teachers partners in reform. As New Jersey Governor Thomas H. Kean, Chairman of the Education Commission of the States, has said, "For all that we have done to improve teaching, we haven't talked to teachers, or rather we have talked too much and listened too little." We believe that from teachers will come fresh ideas on how to address the problems facing the schools.

This paper, which has been prepared as part of the Teacher Renaissance Initiative of the Education Commission of the States, urges states to continue to press for excellence in education by making teachers partners in school improvement. It explains what research indicates are next steps that policy makers can take to affect student achievement. Though much has been done to improve education in the past several years, much remains to be done. A second wave of reform must roll across the states. Policy makers must acknowledge the school as the locus of change and teachers as the human bridge between state actions and classroom changes. Turning to those who know first hand what is needed to improve schools -- turning to teachers -- could lead to a renaissance in teaching and to real gains in student achievement. As Governor Kean has stated, "What teachers have to say is important and worth listening to. We must turn to the people we trust, and I trust teachers."

PROGRESS TO DATE

States have been seeking to improve the teaching profession through a wide range of policies that affect both prospective and practicing teachers. Some states hope to entice more of their best and brightest young people to pursue careers in teaching through education scholarships, loan programs linked to service, and higher starting salaries. They are seeking more able teacher candidates by strengthening training and certification requirements. They are providing alternative routes to teacher certification so that people from other professions can switch to careers in education. Through teacher internships, induction programs, mentorships and career ladders, states are offering teachers wider opportunities. New teachers get help making the transition from learning how to teach to teaching effectively. Experienced teachers have new possibilities for advancing in the profession.

These and other exemplary programs do seem to hold promise for bettering conditions for teachers. Most, however, are still in their early stages, and efforts to improve teaching are still rather uneven within states. Taken collectively, state action to date can provide helpful guideposts for other states. They can also help other states recognize that even well intentioned programs sometimes have unanticipated consequences. For instance:

- Fewer students per teacher may be highly desirable and mean better conditions for learning. But lowering the teacher-student ratio may also worsen the problem of teacher shortages.

- Merit pay schemes that reward exemplary teaching may also produce a divisiveness among teachers that inhibits the cooperative relationships necessary for productive change. Teachers themselves often question the validity of how "merit" is determined and the effect that distinguishing "merit" has on staff morale.

- Raising certification standards and testing entering teachers may help assure the competence of new recruits but also make shortages of teachers more severe. The availability of Black and Hispanic teachers may be affected by the use of norm-referenced tests.

As even this brief summary makes clear, finding solutions to the challenges that face the schools is no simple matter. That we must continue to deal with issues of the quality and quantity of teachers is obvious, especially in light of the problems that may otherwise arise. The National Institute of Education (NIE) estimates that 2.6 million teachers will be needed by 1992 but only 1.6 million are likely to be available if current trends continue (The Condition of Education, 1984). Rising enrollments, broader opportunities for women and minorities, and the retirement of 20% to 40% of the teacher workforce in the next decade give cause for concern. Experts warn that present shortages of mathematics, science, computer and special education teachers are expected to spread to all subject areas and all parts of the nation.

BIG CHALLENGES REMAIN

That talented, dedicated teachers are the key to an education of value for children is without question. That a school is more than a building and that a curriculum is only as good as the teacher instructing the students is also self evident. Staffing the classrooms of the 1990's with under-trained or ill-qualified people is not a workable solution to the prospect of empty classrooms. Any future attempts to improve our system of schooling must recognize that good teaching is at the heart of educational excellence. Our priority now must be to create the conditions that will encourage excellent teachers to remain in the classroom. We must keep trying to make teaching a more attractive and satisfying career in today's competitive world of work.

In a series of recent national surveys, teachers report that the historic attractions of teaching -- personal satisfaction, job security and summers off -- are no longer sufficient to offset poor salaries and poor working conditions. When asked if they would enter teaching again nearly half of teachers surveyed nationally responded that they would not (NEA 1983). About half also said they would not advise their children to become teachers, neither sons or daughters (Gallup 1984) nor any young person (Harris 1984).

Deep feelings of dissatisfaction have resulted in an alarming exodus of teachers from the profession. In an address to the 1985 University of Colorado Education Conference, Art Wise of the Rand Corporation reported that half the people who enter teaching leave within five years; two-thirds of those who leave are the most academically able. Susan Rosenholtz, in a paper written for ECS in 1984, agrees that, "Those most likely to succeed in the classroom are the most likely to leave it."

Why teachers leave and how many leave were explored in Strengthening the Profession, the 1985 Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher. According to that survey, "half of all teachers (51%) currently teaching in American schools say they have seriously considered leaving the profession to enter some other occupation." Love of teaching and the satisfaction of working with students are the main reasons teachers give for staying. Nonetheless, more than one-fourth of all teachers (27%) say they are "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to leave teaching for a different occupation within the next five years. Sixty-two percent of those who are considering leaving cite low salaries as the primary reason. Other major causes of teacher dissatisfaction are tied directly to "working conditions that negatively affect their performance, including a lack of opportunity for professional growth and development, inadequate preparation time, conflict with and lack of support from principals and colleagues, and the failure to deal effectively with student misbehavior." (Rosenholtz, 1985).

Lack of prestige is another serious problem for teachers. When teachers surveyed by the Gallup Poll in 1985 were asked to compare teaching to 12 other professions, more than 50% ranked teaching first in terms of the profession's contribution to society. But only 1% ranked teaching first in terms of "the amount of prestige people in the profession have in their communities."

The message from teachers is clear: lack of prestige, poor working conditions and low salaries are undermining the very real satisfactions of teaching. Teachers want to be respected as professionals and compensated more like professionals; they want to work in conditions that allow them to perform as professionals. The alternative to responding to their concerns is to see current trends continue -- the departure of teachers from teaching and a growing shortage of qualified replacements.

PROMISING POSSIBILITIES

How can we create conditions in schools that enable teachers to teach and students to learn? From studies of "effective" schools conducted over the past decade has come strong support for the following ideas:

- In effective schools education is a collaborative enterprise. Teachers and administrators share a sense of common purpose and work together rather than in isolation.

- Expectations are high in effective schools. Administrators, teachers and parents make teaching and learning the school's first priority.

- Effective schools set clear goals for student achievement. Teachers and principals in these schools believe their students are capable of real achievement and work systematically to meet learning objectives.

These findings suggest some new directions for state policy — promising possibilities that some states have begun to explore and that other states should consider if they want education reform to produce real results in classrooms.

"Nothing serves an organization better . . . than leadership which knows what it wants, communicates those intentions successfully, empowers others, and knows when and how to stay on course and when to change," concluded Warren Bennis in a study of 80 highly successful heads of public and private organizations (quoted in Sergiovanni, 1983). The research on effective schools duplicates this conclusion: strong, sensitive leadership by the principal plays a central role in making schools good environments for teaching and learning. Policies to promote better leadership in schools, then, seem to offer real hope. Hope is also offered by policies that recognize how strongly school climate affects student achievement. Climate might be described as the dynamic social system of the school or the ways in which people conduct everyday business, develop goals, and accommodate change.

Leadership

Research has shown that school leaders, building principals and teacher leaders, set the organizational tone for excellence. Strong principals have a clear sense of mission and are able to make their vision of the school a shared one. They have high expectations for teachers, students and themselves. Their discipline policies contribute to an orderly learning environment. They see themselves as leaders in instruction, not simply as managers of an administrative system, and they support teachers with the help and resources teachers need. Their evaluations of teachers are based on sound classroom performance objectives aimed at helping teachers improve their instructional skills.

Some states have already begun to seek ways to help principals become effective leaders. In Arizona, the state department of education has established the "Principals' Institute," for example, and South Carolina, which has already set up centers for assessing and training principals, is experimenting with "administrative career ladders." But more states must join the search if principals throughout the nation are to gain the skills and opportunities they need to become the instructional leaders of effective schools. As Chris Pipho sums it up "Principals, assistant principals, and supervisors -- the

first line of leadership at the building level — need to be retooled if the excellence movement is going to succeed," (Pipho, 1985).

Climate

An overall climate conducive to learning is a clear determinative of student learning, research tells us. Where decisions are shared and teachers and administrators work collaboratively there is greater agreement on what the school is trying to accomplish and greater commitment to shared goals. Sense of purpose breathes life and meaning into the activities of the people at work in schools. The result is better performance and greater job satisfaction.

Building school cohesiveness is especially important given the isolated nature of classroom teaching. Isolation may be one of the greatest obstacles to the professional development of teachers. Typically, in their day-to-day work, "teachers realize little benefit from the advice, experience or expertise of their colleagues" (Rosenholtz, 1985). Research suggests that the most effective schools -- the schools in which student gains are the greatest — do not isolate teachers but, instead, encourage professional dialogue and collaboration. "In effective schools, teaching is seen as a collective rather than as an individual enterprise, where analysis, evaluation, and experimentation with one's colleagues set the conditions under which teachers improve." (Rosenholtz, 1985).

As the importance of collaboration has become more apparent, states have begun to initiate policies that help offset the teacher's traditional isolation in the classroom. Some states have programs for supervising, evaluating and helping first-year teachers, for example. A key component of career ladder systems is having mentor teachers coach less experienced teachers. In some performance evaluation programs, principals and teachers work together to improve instruction. In some staff development programs, teachers help each other develop new skills.

But with these new approaches come new demands for resources. Collaborative planning and decision-making take time, a commodity already in very short supply for administrators and for teachers. (Teachers currently spend an average of 90% of their paid time in contact with students and an estimated 15 hours a week in unpaid, out-of-class preparation.) Career ladders, performance evaluations and staff development take time, money, and technical assistance.

Measures of the sort states have already taken are very attractive in many ways. Raising the requirements for entering schools of education, for instance, should help to assure that prospective teachers are better qualified to teach. Raising beginning salaries could certainly make teaching more appealing to college graduates who now choose other careers for financial reasons; raising salaries across the board could well encourage teachers to stay in the profession who might otherwise leave. But there are limits to what traditional regulation/incentive policies like these can accomplish. As research makes us more aware of how important cooperation is to the successful workings of the public education system, the limitations of policies that affect teachers as individuals rather than the overall operation of the schools become more clear. So do the advantages of developing new policy initiatives.

Particularly promising about the prospect of developing new policies is the clear message from researchers that new approaches could directly affect what happens in the classroom between teachers and students. Particularly challenging about developing these policies is the fact that there are no simple solutions. Any measures to improve the total school environment require a willingness to cope with complexity. Schools are human institutions whose excellence is not determined strictly by the size of classes, number of library books, condition of buildings or even in the level of teacher salaries. Excellence comes instead from the attitudes and behavior of the people in schools. Attitudes, in turn, are greatly affected by the ways in which the school organization is structured and lead.

The shape new policies should take is not yet entirely clear, though there are good indications that career ladders, academies for principals, programs for helping beginning teachers and other such measures are steps in the right direction. These programs have in common the possibility that teachers will experience greater classroom success as they grow with colleagues and contribute to the direction of their school. It is the opportunity to contribute to a shared vision of schooling that drives individuals toward common goals of excellence.

Changes that last are most likely to develop from the bottom up, from activities that grow out of the particular needs and circumstances of the people within schools. The specific innovations that this process will produce cannot be guaranteed or mandated. But they will have the force of teacher belief and ownership behind them. Changes that are shaped to the needs of the school, by the people who devise and carry them out, have the best hope for improving education for children.

THE TIME TO ACT

It is clear that now is the time to turn to teachers for help in defining the shape of policies to encourage school improvement. Little listened to so far and rarely heard, teachers must become not the objects of reform but partners in reform. With them lies the hope and indeed the fate of school reform.

What, then, can policy makers do to develop productive partnerships with teachers? Just as partnerships for progress within schools must involve working together with mutual trust and respect, so must partnerships between state officials and teachers. Governor Kean summed up the notion of partnerships with teachers in this way, "Now is the time to act because all our work in the past three years has redefined teaching as a profession. It's now time to hear teachers' ideas on how teaching can be made a better profession . . . If we can find productive ways to release teachers' creativity, we can sustain the progress of the last three years. What do individual teachers have to say about what has to happen in the classroom for students to learn? What can principals, superintendents and school boards do to support them? What can state policy leaders do now to encourage the practitioner?"

State leaders now have the unprecedented opportunity to make a lasting impact on the quality of education across the nation by making teachers partners in school reform. What they hear from teachers can provide direction for the next wave of school improvement policies in states — policies that can make a difference in America's classrooms. Acting now they can create the climate that allows productive change to occur in schools and they can make the vision of educational excellence a reality.

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